Scott DeVeaux: *The Birth of BeBop: A Social and Musical History.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 572 pp.; ISBN 0-520-20579-0; hardcover; $35.00.

The transition from 'swing' to 'bebop' has often been described as a cultural and stylistic revolution A revolution in which the American jazz musician turned from being an entertainer, such as Louis Armstrong or Cab Calloway were in the 1930s, to becoining an avant-garde artist in the sense in which the 1940s New York action painters weic once considered avant-garde That is, peifoimers who turned theii backs on easy money and mass acceptance With bebop, jazz had wieslled liee of its tacky associations with entertainment packages sandwiching the inusic between dance and coinedy acts and had moved on to upmarket culture like opera and modern poetry which cannot survive without grants, foundations, commissions, festivals, and so on

The romantic view of the artist as rebel and 'social deviant' received a new lease of life in literature In Mailer and the beat writers bebop was excess bordering on chaos and madness il 'sent' you; and it was intimately associated with blackness Race has always been the subtext in narratives of the history of jazz DeVeaux quotes the doyen of American jazz criticism for inany years, Martin Williams of the Smithsonian Institution, recalling his eai ly exposure to Parker and Gillespie at Billy Berg's in Los Angeles 'I'm a southern kid I've atill got all that latent stuff in me [about iace] that I haven't dealt with I'm living in this paradox That [bebop] sounded aiiogant, uppity [When I] saw Bird's coinbo, what struck ine even more than the music was the attitude coming off the bandstand – self-confident, aggressive It was somcthing I'd nevcr seen from black musicians beforе '

There is a certain emotional satisfaction in narrating this apparent bandstand insolence of the beboppeis and theii music as delibeiate acts of defiance of the allegedly bland white big band dance music and, implicitly, of the iacism of the (all-white) American music industry This happens repeatedly in the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baiaka Recent black literary criticism, inspired by Ralph Ellison's and Albert Murray's writings on jazz, has also suggested that the bebop practice of 'composing' new melodies on the choid sequences of Bioadway staiidaids was a form of 'signifying' on the sentimental dross of white American mass market music [1] Muriay in particulai has been very effective in debunking the myth that the jazz musician is an artist who has been toiced by white racisin to earn his money on the 'road' by doing 'commercial' dance dates while seciety despising lhc folks he entei tdined [2]

Beeausc jazz now is predominantly an 'art' (i e conceil) inusic, it has bccome difficult to remember that a 'jazz' musician in the 'swrng era' was primarily a woiker in a dance band It is one of the many virtues of this excellent new study of the most crucial period in jazz history that DeVeaux so effectively einphasizes that black musicians like Ellington, Basie and Billy Eckstinc weic leadcis of dancc bands Foi a black man in the 1930s, a professional dancc band career looked likc a 'middlc class' profession; an alternative to bcing a lawyer, docior or dentist In contrast lo a long and expensive college education liere

1 Cf. Henry Louis Gates' comparison of Coltrane and Julie Andrews' versions of 'My Favourite Things' in Gates' *The Blackness of Blackness (1984).*

2 Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues (1976).*

was the prospect of immediate, solid earnings Then there was, too, the luic of thc extra-curriculai glamoui tliat seemed to go with tlie job Thc lattei aspect was manufactured by the publicity 'machines' ol the inusic industry which began to malte celebiities of band lcadcrs on the movie or professional athletics model Tliis also helps explain why wc now think of tlie musıc of this era in terms of individuals liltc Ellington, Basie and Charlie Barnet DeVeaux argues that we must think of thc Swing Eia as a 'system' in which tlic integration ol dance musıc with othei forms of mass-market entertainment was carried out on a scale and with a degree of technological sophistication never seen before, 'iiicluding radio, rccoidings and film In musıc tlic big money was in bigband dance music '

Soinc black swing bands managed quite well Ellington was regularly on network radio (e g al thc Cotton Club and elsewhere) as well as in films, bul foi many tlie swing era ineant a gruelling regimcn of onc-iiight stands touring, particularly in thc South DeVeaux looks, howevei, at the interesting case of Coleman Hawkins who, although the first great saxophonist in jazz histoiy, failed to make it as a lcader of a dance band Hawkins became a famous soloist in the Fletchei Hcndeison band and was encouraged, indeed cxpcctcd, to bccome a successful dance band lcadci as other virtuosos likc Artie Shaw and Harry James had Howcvcr, in contrast to such white band leaders, DeVeaux makes clear liow much it was expected ol black ones to be vaudeville entertainers as well Armstrong, Calloway, even Gillespie, understood they had to negotiate such expectations and yet picscivc theii professional dignity[3] Ellington, famously, adopted an elegantly suave stage mask Hawkins, who turned out be a musician a few years ahcad of his time, would not, or could not, soften his daunting instiumental prowess by ingratiating clowning In any case when Hawkins came back from Europe in 1939 it was too latc for yet another blaclt dance band to jump on the giavy train of the dance band business With 'Body and Soul' of that year as his calling-card, DeVeaux convincingly portrays liow Hawltins first had to play the less lucrative night clubs on 52nd St with smallci bands, and later on how he discovcicd a ncw careci as concert artist when the jazz concert' einerged as a commercially viable form

Dancc bands were, in other words, central to the music industry Dizzy Gillespie (the man who in *Time* and *Life* magazines with a beret, shades, goatee and the rest was made to incarnate the socially deviant bop hipster) tiied iepeatedly to get into tlie big time, first with Cab Calloway, then with Billy Ecltstine, finally with his own bigband A famous film short shows Gillespie fronting a big band and doing a fcw bump and grind steps for thc benefit ol tlie camera Cleaily Gillespie had learncd from Calloway what it takes for a black dance band leader to becoine a commeicial success (though Gillespie didn't) DeVeaux here and elsewhere effectively demonstrates that it is anachronistic to think that black jazz musicians thcn saw themsclvcs as 'artists' who turned up their noses at dance music The stoiy of Hawkins and Gillcspic shows how black jazz musicians only gave up on the big dancc bands when tliesc bands offered only the dedd ends of bad woiking conditions and no chances of (economic) advancement War restrictions on road

3 The buge cross-over success of Louis Jordan's cool clowning with blues and 'novelty' songs is a further example. Jordan is essential to understanding the general acceptance of blacli dance music by white audiences in tlic 1950s, now sold as 'rock'n'roll.' Cf. C. Gillett, *The Sound of the City* (1 983).

transportation, the draft, and the racism of the music industry forced most black bands to take the less lucrative jobs which entailed incessant touring, particularly in the much hated South. Tierre Eckstine and later Gillespie found audiences largely unresponsive to subtle progressive harmonic sequences and fast, virtuosic improvisation. Southern black working-class audiences wanted solid down-home cooking blues.

In music, race is often dealt with as discourse about the blues. LeRoi Jones made it the basis of his *Blues People* (1963), and many other writers have made it the litmus test of authenticity in African-American music. As familiar examples from James Baldwin through Baraka and Alice Walker to Gates show, (black) blues is used in a racial melodrama to expose the racism and inferiority of white American popular music in general. DeVeaux' discussion of blues playing in early bebop jazz asks for a more subtle, and also historically more interesting, consideration of black musicians' attitude to the blues. DeVeaux reminds us that ideas of 'middle class' respectability and progress were deeply embedded among African-Americans in this period. In the *Music Dial*, one of the very few black-run trade journals, one could read that musicians should act publicly as representatives of the race. And many young black northern musicians therefore thought that they should not just give their newly-migrant urban audiences yam and grits blues but should try to educate them by elevating their musical tastes. It needs to be said explicitly that not all good black jazz musicians are good blues men. Gillespie, as DeVeaux reminds the reader, is frank enough to admit that he is not a blues man in the sense that trumpeter Hot Lips Page and Charlie Parker were.[4] DeVeaux makes a good case that the reason Parker's music is so deeply satisfying in contrast to many other excellent jazz improvisers, is that his playing showed how deep black blues could be integrated with modern (as in 'dissonant'), sophisticated jazz. His argument asks us to hear Parker's blues playing not as a 'signifying' on white jazz, but on the African-American blues tradition.

In DeVeaux's narrative Coleman Hawkins showed the stylistic and commercial possibilities for the jazz player as virtuosic concert musician. It took war time draft and road transportation restrictions – fewer (lucrative) jobs for big dance bands with fewer first-rate musicians, as well as a musicians' union ban on recording between 1942 and 1944 which broke the monopoly of recording by Decca, Columbia and Victor – to make the small jazz combo and the jam session format the favoured one for young black musicians. During the war, night clubs and 'all-stars' jam concerts (such as those begun in 1946 by Norman Granz) and incessant recording for new small labels like Savoy and Blue Note became the 'media' of what came to count as the essence of jazz.

*The Birth of Bebop* is a marvellous synthesis of the jazz monographs (its portraits of Hawkins and Gillespie, for example, are truly informative), oral jazz history and the sociology of economic conditions of professional black jazz musicians in the period between 1930 and 1950. The density of detail particularly as regards the latter is astounding. I can only think of Eric Hobsbawm's great *The Jazz Scene* (1959) which tried to do something similar but with less data. In addition, DeVeaux has a gift not often seen among jazz musicologists, namely that of interpreting a musician's style through musical

4 Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be or Not to Bop* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 310. Both Page and Parker were from the Southwest.

examples (see, for examplc his comparisons of Hawluns' playing with Lester Young's; or Gillespie's with Parker's) By students of black cultuie, jazz is often used as an archive of incidental oi anecdotal illustration, oi an object of mythologizing This book is stiongly recommended as a sober, enlightening, well-written historical and stylistic study of a crucial pei iod in African-American music

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## Correction

Due to an oveisight duiing the publication process, the name and institutional affiliation of Erik Kielland-Lund of the Dcparlment of British and American Studies, Univeisity of Oslo, were omitted from thc end of his ieview of Sacvan Bcicovich (cd), The *Cambridge History of American Literature, Vol II Prose Writings, 1820-1865* (New York and Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1995), which appearcd in the last issue of the journal The editors would likc to apologise for this omission